

Parents beware: Packaged foods marketed to children are significantly higher in sugar

By [Christopher Curley](#) on May 3, 2023 — [Fact checked by](#)



Experts say children can be persistent in wanting certain food items. skaman306/Getty Images

- **Researchers say packaged foods marketed to children contain higher levels of sugar and are lower in essential nutrients than other products.**
- **They said cereal and toaster pastries had the most child-appealing marketing among the products they studied.**
- **Experts say more education for parents as well as government regulation on product marketing to children are needed.**

Foods marketed at kids with the most child-appealing packaging are often higher in sugar and lower in vital nutrients than those with less appealing packaging

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That's according to a [Canadian study](#) published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

Researchers looked at nearly 6,000 individual food products relevant to children's diets and reported that around 13% of them contained child-appealing marketing, with the power of that marketing varying from product to product.

In general, however, though there was a weak correlation between marketing power and general nutrient levels, the researchers said the foods that were evaluated to be the most appealing to children were higher in sugar — with an average of 14.7 grams versus 9 grams — compared to standard packaging.

“While this study found variability in nutritional quality and composition depending on the food category and the nutrient, results showed that in many cases, products with child-appealing packaging were higher in nutrients of concern — in particular, total sugars, free sugars, and sodium — than products with non-child-appealing packaging,” the researchers from the University of Toronto and the University of Ottawa wrote in a press release.

Of all the foods studied, only two categories had more than 50% child-appealing marketing: cereal and toaster pastries. These were among the products most aggressively marketed to kids.

The study looked specifically at the Canadian food market, but experts say it's likely the same processes and conclusions apply to the United States.

“It is impossible to know without collecting the data, but in my experience, heavily processed foods high in salt, sugar, and fat are relentlessly marketed to kids in the U.S.,” [Dr. Natasha Agbai](#), a pediatrician based in San Francisco, told *Medical News Today*.

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Why marketing matters

How does one determine what is “child-appealing” and what isn’t?

This was a core challenge the researchers attempted to address with a codified system based on a dozen individual categories.

“The current lack of standardization in terms of definitions and methodologies for evaluating child-appeal is concerning,” the researchers wrote.

“The specific marketing techniques that were displayed on product packages varied across food categories,” they said. “However, core techniques that have traditionally been found to be used in child-appealing marketing, such as having a child-appealing visual design, appeals to fun or cool and the use of characters remained popular across the sample.”

Of course, children aren’t usually buying cereals or pastries for themselves, but what appeals to kids often influences their parents.

“The ‘nag factor’ or ‘pester power’ is a term used to describe the influence that children, especially toddlers and preschoolers, have on their parents’ purchasing decisions,” Agbai explained. “Marketers recognize that children can successfully negotiate purchases by constantly pestering or nagging their parents to buy a product they desire. The idea is that the more a child asks for a product, the more likely the parent is to give in and make the purchase.

“This phenomenon is a potent force in the retail industry, as children can

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More education, regulation on children's products needed

To help curb the marketing of less healthy foods directly to kids, the researchers suggested that policymakers implement more aggressive marketing restrictions to protect children.

[Dr. Daniel Ganjian](#), FAAP, a pediatrician at Providence Saint John's Health Center in California, agreed, noting that doctors have a role to play as well.

"Parenting and pediatric groups should come out with a best-practices policy for children's marketing," Ganjian told *Medical News Today*. "Then parents should only buy from stores and organizations that follow this policy. Another way is to ask the government to regulate the marketing of unhealthy foods to kids."

Parents have a role to play, too.

"For parents, it's becoming aware of what is truly healthy and unhealthy for their kids," [Jesse Feder](#), RDN, a dietitian based in Florida, told *Medical News Today*.

"Learning what these foods can do to your kids can help parents understand the severity of the situation," he added. "Teaching your kids why certain foods are bad and others are good and instilling healthy eating habits is important. Successful policies include the addition of nutrition information on menus in restaurants in the U.S., increasing healthy food availability in poor neighborhoods, reducing the amount of food swamps, and decreasing the sizes of drinks and items available in fast food chains, to name a few."

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